

## Innovative Phone-in Radio Program for Prisoners Enrolled as Students at Indira Gandhi National Open University

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**Abstract:** *Providing education to prisoners while in jail is a win-win situation for both prisoners and society. For prisoners, the educational experiences in jail reduce their mental strain, isolation, and stress due to incarceration and simultaneously make them employment ready after their release from prison. Education helps prisoners become fit to earn on their own, and thereby reduces the chances of returning to jail (recidivism). Therefore, through educational experiences, the government saves money on prisoners' maintenance and earns taxes from their later employment. Providing education to prisoners, especially increasing efforts to provide quality education, such as is available to common students, is needed. The 'Nagpur Experiment', wherein the student prisoners of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) at Nagpur Central Jail are provided the 'Mediated Phone in Radio Counselling' through public radio on a live radio programme is an attempt in this direction.*

**Keywords:** *prisoner education, radio, phone-in, IGNOU, Nagpur*

### Introduction

According to Indian philosophy, “Saa Vidya Yaa Vimuktaye.” This Sanskrit saying means “knowledge liberates from bondage.” Thus, the purpose of knowledge is liberation from greed, bad feelings, sadness, etc. This knowledge should be made available to all sections of society without hindrance. In this direction, prisoners are one part of society who are deprived of several basic needs, and the development of knowledge through education is among them.

Education of prisoners is a matter of concern, as it is not given due importance in many countries. Though providing educational opportunity to prisoners is indeed the first step, creating an enabling and supporting environment for prisoners to educate themselves while in prison is the next step. This article discusses these issues with a value-added prison education activity directed by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) at the Central Prison in the city of Nagpur (Central India). IGNOU is the premier distance education institute in India and offers free higher education to prisoners in the country. To break the isolated learning of the student prisoners at Nagpur, a phone-in radio program was started through Gyan Vani Public Radio. The details of this program are discussed in this article.

### Indira Gandhi National Open University

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is a Central (Federal) University under the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. It was established by an Act of Parliament in 1985 with an objective to promote and strengthen distance education in the country. It is the premier distance education institution with the entire country (707 districts) under its jurisdiction. As of 2018, it is offering 241 academic programs that include certificates, diplomas, undergraduate degrees, postgraduate degrees, M.Phil, and Ph.D degrees. The disciplines also vary and include the general arts, humanities, social sciences, natural



sciences, medical sciences, and information technology. The programs are delivered and monitored through a National Network of 67 Regional Centers and 3,430 Learner Support Centers; these are reputed institutions with the necessary infrastructure to run the allotted courses. IGNOU enrolled 1,147,056 learners during 2018-2019 and have 3,093,583 learners on the rosters. All the degrees of IGNOU are well-recognized and are on par with other universities. IGNOU uses multiple media instruction in addition to printed self-instruction materials sent to students by speed post. The multiple media resources include an online web portal, Gyan Darshan (dedicated TV channel), and Gyan Vani (dedicated FM Radio Network).

Since its inception, IGNOU has been striving to reach out to under-served sections of society, including those in rural and forest areas, prisoners, transgender people, and commercial sex workers. It makes special efforts in bringing these groups into the higher education fold.

One such special initiative is the Bachelor's Preparatory Program (BPP). Most of the deprived groups study only in the school in their vicinity. They do not want to leave their village and travel to other towns or cities for higher studies. Also, they need to engage in labor to sustain themselves and their families. Most of their educational qualifications will be up to the 5th, 8th, or 10th grade level. Their physical, geographical, economic, or social conditions prevent them from studying further even if they have a desire to study at a later stage of life. They cannot join higher education as they have not passed the 10+2 grade exam, which is an essential prerequisite for undergraduate admissions.

Thus, IGNOU offers a bridge course to bring all such adults into higher education studies. This course is a six-month Bachelor's Preparatory Program, which is offered to anyone who is eighteen years of age; it operates without any barrier based on religion, region, economic status, or gender. The students are provided with study materials, and they have to appear for a national-level exam that consists of two papers. Those who successfully complete the exam are eligible to join the three-year BA, B.Com, BSW, or BA (tourism studies) programs of IGNOU. This BPP serves as a true gift for all those who have a desire to study further, but who would otherwise be deprived of this opportunity due to various constraints.

As part of these efforts, IGNOU has started offering free education to prisoners and has waived all sorts of fees including admission, examination, and convocation fees. For all the prisoners, self instruction study material is provided in their chosen language (English, Hindi or Marathi). The prisoners constituted 2.66% of IGNOU students from 2013-2015 (Chaudhary et al., 2014). The prisoners of Nagpur Central Jail are part of this student cohort.

### **Nagpur Central Jail and IGNOU Student Prisoners**

Nagpur Central Jail is one of the oldest central jails in the country. The jail has been proactive in the reformation and rehabilitation of prisoners. IGNOU Nagpur Regional Center opened a special study center for prisoners there in 2010. Through various persistent efforts, the prisoners have shown a keen interest to join several programs offered by IGNOU. The efforts include "Gyan Ganga," awareness meetings, which are held regularly to motivate the prisoners to educate themselves through the free education offered by IGNOU. In these meetings, prisoners are told about the importance of IGNOU, the study methods it follows, and the recognition of degrees awarded by IGNOU for employment and further studies. They are advised to utilize their free time in jail positively and constructively by joining IGNOU Studies. This program helps them to receive a degree, which is the same as the one received by any IGNOU student outside of prison.

Other motivational educational experiences provided by IGNOU include quiz competitions, debates, and essay writing competitions, which are conducted frequently for student prisoners. Prizes are distributed by eminent personalities like Vice Chancellors and Directors of National Institutes. As a result, the cumulative student enrollment, which started at 12, today

has reached 1,018. The students include those sentenced to the death penalty and women (currently 46).

### **Gyan Vani FM Radio Station and the Nagpur Experiment**

Prisoners are in an isolated and secluded environment removed from society. Radio is used in a few countries to broadcast programs to prisoners from the outside and to create a community within prison premises for the prisoners, so as to reduce their seclusion and feelings of isolation. The Prison Radio Project in San Francisco, Prison Radio Association (PRA) in the UK, Radio Focus in Israel, and Community Radio in Pune, Mumbai and the Central Jails of Maharashtra, India are some such initiatives that provide programs for prisoners (Ansari, 2014). The specialty of the Nagpur Radio Experiment is that prisoners are involved in a “live” broadcast on public radio where they can ask their questions. A description of the program follows.

IGNOU has a network of Gyan Vani FM Radio Stations with a dedicated education channel in different cities. Nagpur Gyan Vani resumed functioning, after a break in 2013 for administrative reasons, in December 2017. It broadcasts recorded academic programs, interviews, and “live” phone-in programs hosted by experts. Subject-specific academic sessions are also held for IGNOU students. Students who are not in prison can call the teacher in the studio and ask their questions and listen to clarifications. Whereas this resource is enjoyed by common students, students in prison were previously deprived of this opportunity due to security and other reasons.

As a result of this limitation, efforts were made to convince the prison authorities to provide FM radio in their academic auditorium, a space earmarked for academic or spiritual activities. We explained to the authorities that we had an increasing number of students, and our initiative was in tune with their objective of “reformation and rehabilitation.” We explained that this unique experiment was the first of its kind and that its success would bring an associated positive image to the prison. They agreed to provide the FM radio and the auditorium, so that student prisoners could sit and listen to the questions asked by outside students and the answers given by the teacher. However, the students missed an opportunity to ask their own questions and receive clarifications.

Due to the restrictions inside the jail premises, the prisoners had no access to a telephone. By understanding these local conditions, we circumvented this difficulty by discovering an innovative mediated phone-in radio counseling program, where the prisoners did not directly use the telephone. The sessions were announced one week in advance. Student prisoners were advised to go through the relevant self-instruction study material provided and determine the clarifications they need.

Timing of the program was scheduled in consultation with the prison authorities so that attendance was ensured. To be more specific, the general phone-in program was held from 7:00 PM to 8:00 PM, but this time was not suitable for prisoners, as they were in their respective barracks before sunset. So, for prisoners, the radio programs were scheduled in the morning from 9:00 AM to 10:00 AM. Even if someone had work duty, that person could receive permission to attend the radio program.

Students submitted their doubts, questions, and clarifications on a relevant topic to the Coordinator of the IGNOU Special Study Center in the jail. Radio counseling for some common subjects of BPP (such as a preparatory course in social sciences) and BA 1st year courses (such as a foundation course in Hindi, humanities, or social sciences) were held. The average number of questions per session was three, and sometimes went up to six. Some of the questions have included: “Could you please explain the special features of the Indian Constitution?”; “What is the Citizen’s Charter?”; and “What is the difference between formal and informal letters?” The students assembled in the hall to listen to the program. Then, the coordinator came to the jail office and called the Gyan Vani Radio Station Studio while the session was going live. He

would call and say that there was a question from a Nagpur Central Jail Student Prisoner and read the question. The teacher in the studio answered the query and the student prisoners sitting in the jail listened to their questions being answered. The process continued until the end of the session. The teacher concluded with what would be discussed in the next session. Due to the unique nature of this experiment, both society and the media have shown a keen interest. A recent newspaper article titled "Prisoners in Nagpur to take Radio route to excel in education; Body is trapped, Mind is free: IGNOU launches Phone in Radio Counselling to help Nagpur Central Jail Prisoners" highlighted the program (Swarajya, 2019 and Kulkarni, 2019).

It should be added that the radio program is a public media program and could also be listened to by outside students. So, outside students taking the same courses were also notified about the timing of the program. Thus, it has a wider outreach and in a sense is "reverse inclusive," because although it is primarily meant for student prisoners, it also includes public students.

This being a new experiment, the author personally interacted with student prisoners at the prison premises to listen to their feedback and suggestions for improvement. They expressed their happiness that it was becoming easier to study as their study problems are solved, that the language of teaching has become localized (otherwise study material is prepared in National level Hindi), and that they are becoming increasingly motivated for their studies. They were so interested that they wanted to increase the frequency of the program to two or three sessions per week and to extend sessions for other courses. They also wanted to broadcast the program through speakers in all barracks, because at present, only those near the radio listen.

### **Conclusion**

Providing educational opportunities to prisoners while in jail is a win-win situation for both prisoners and society. To create an enabling environment and multidimensional support to motivate prisoners and sustain their desire is crucial. In this direction, the present Nagpur Experiment, the innovative phone-in radio program, was undertaken. This is a simple program that can be followed anywhere in the world with minimal efforts. Radio is affordable, accessible, and simple to operate. In most cases, no external connection is needed, and even mobile phones have built-in radio. Therefore, radio can be an effective medium for communication flow from one side. It can be more effective with a two-way communication flow and the present Nagpur Experiment stands as an example for the development of this method of communication for underprivileged and underserved populations.

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